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Irony as a Technique in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*: A Russian Formalist Approach

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Abstract:

Russian Formalism, an important school of criticism, is devoted to the study of literary text based on various artistic strategies employed by the author. These features include not only grammar and syntax but also literary devices such as meter, point of view, irony and other figures of speech. In the present study, the focus is centred on the technique of irony to analyse R. K. Narayan's highly celebrated novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. Ample light has been thrown on all the major aspects of the plot. With the help of textual examples, it has been justified that the author hasn't used 'irony' for the purpose of amusement and glorification rather it has been used as a sharp weapon to prick the veiled nuances out of the texture of the text to bring forth and resolve the thematic convolutions.

Keywords: Russian Formalism, Irony, Text, Syntax, Meter, Mythical pattern, Destruction, Point of view.

Russian Formalism: An Introduction

Formalism is a school that deals with literary criticism and literary theory. It focuses on the structure of a text. In this process a piece of text is studied and analysed without any outside influence on it. At the surface level Formalism has two prominent schools one is 'Russian Formalism' and second is 'Anglo-American New Criticism'. Both of the schools are similar in countless manners but both have immensely developed in isolation and can't be termed as identical. Formalists intend to find out the general laws that make literature more specific and close to science. Formalists don't pay any heed to the influences of culture, authorship, society and even the content. On the other hand the importance lies with forms, genres and discourse. The inherent features of a text including grammar meter, tropes and syntax are considered for analysis whereas the historical, cultural and biographical aspects are eclipsed. The birth of Russian Formalism is as a reaction against 'Romanticism'. Subjectivity and individual creative genius are the two major concerns of Romantic literature thus the formalists shifted their interest from subjectivity to objectivity and content to form.

Russian Formalism moved through many dark and suspicious phases from 1920s onwards as the critics and scholars remained in a strong doubt that a text can flourish without paying any attention to its origin and background of political and social context. They tried to eclipse its shine through negativity, but the importance of formalism was never diminished. Mary Ann Cain vividly justifies formalism in a single sentence,

“Formalism asserts that the text stands on its own as a complete entity apart from the writer who produced it. That’s why many writers who teach creative writing acknowledge some unteachable aspects of writing-desire, for instance.” (91)

Text is all powerful and keeps the ability to stand on its own feet without the aid of any crutches of culture and history. Roland Barthes’s notion of death of the author is clearly applicable here. The writer will have to accept his own death in order to give importance to the text. Father-son relationship between the author and the text can’t be established. Including this any outside influences have nothing to do with the actual understanding of a text. In other words we may say that a piece of text will speak to the reader without any outside aid. Mary Ann Cain goes to the extent of saying, “One can regard textual products as teachable and still maintained that being a writer is a “natural” act, one not subject to instruction.”(91) A writer is as obvious as heat in fire. There is no need to give such importance to the author, his background and other cultural or social influences. The form of a text is of pertinent importance to get warmer with the comprehension of a text. Intelligibility of a text depends upon its form and not on the content.

Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp and Boris Eichenbaum are some of the chief scholars who are associated with this movement. In order to understand a work of art as a work of art only, one shall have to focus on its form rather on the outside influences. They laid the emphasis on the form at the expense of thematic content. Interestingly the term ‘Formalism’ was ironically chosen by some of the people who were extremely against it. In their opinion it was controversially formal and mechanically structured. They didn’t support the idea to get away with an author’s socio-political positioning. According to the opponents of Formalism, the author and the relevant background are the main sources, which can be termed as the engine for a train. But for a true formalist there is no place for them rather the chief seats are being occupied by techniques, motifs and devices. In the current work the main focus of the study is to elaborate “*The Man Eater of Malgudi*” of R.K.Narayan through the glasses of Russian Formalism in general and the gigantic usage of irony as a technique in particular. It is the narrative that speaks and in this novel Nataraj is presented as a narrator. He states the whole story in the first person. The impact and taste of Russian Formalism is vividly apparent in the whole novel.

Irony as the Chief Technique:

Indo-Anglian writers like R. K. Narayan turned to the technique of irony to create significant patterns of fiction. Narayan is a typical Indian writer, whose creative genius is deeply rooted in the ancient Indian religion which attaches great importance to self-discipline,

renunciation, incarnation, doctrine of rebirth and even of karma. In almost all of his major novels, these Indian themes find their expression. Sometimes, they form the basic theme of the novels and sometimes they provide a mythical pattern or a framework for them. What Daisy says of Raman in *The Painter of Signs* holds equally well for his creator R. K. Narayan, “You always find some ancient model.” (159) Narayan usually locates an ancient myth or legend to express his vision of modern life and puts the salt of irony in order to make it more delicious. This tendency grew more prominent as he crossed his fiftieth year.

Critical opinion usually dubs R. K. Narayan as a small town ironist laughing at small town eccentrics and an amused observer of life. An intensive analysis of a novel like *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), however, reveals quite a different Narayan a writer, who not only asks some fundamental questions about good and evil and their roles in human life, but also provides answers to them. Narayan writes,

“The strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own misdeed. Evil has in it, buried subtly, the infallible seeds of its own destruction. And however frightening a demon might seem, his doom is implied in his own evil propensities.” (Gods 13)

Ironically he keeps on giving inklings that Vasu; the demon will be destroyed due to his own misdeeds. In order to relish Narayan’s use of irony as a narrative technique, it is more appropriate to comprehend the various facets of irony that he employed in this novel. Although there is situational irony, verbal irony, comic irony but the irony that steals the show is beyond doubt the tragic irony. His characters make themselves a room for an ironical situation and Narayan himself states,

“Each tale invariably starts off when an inquiring mind asks of an enlightened one a fundamental question. . . . each tale goes back and further back to an ultimate narrator who had, perhaps, been an eyewitness to the events. The report travels like ripples expanding concentrically, until it reaches the story teller in the village, by whom it is passed on to the children at home. . . . the tales have such inexhaustible vitality in them that people like to hear them narrated again and again . . . engendering in the listener an ever-deepening understanding of life, death and destiny.” (Man 14-15)

The Man-Eater of Malgudi offers a panorama of the ancient and modern juxtaposed together. The Satyanarayan puja is religiously observed. There is Kumar, the elephant who comes out of the hills of its own accord to stay in the temple. There is Nataraj’s wife, the symbol of Indian womanhood steeped in all her superstitions and domestic anxieties. The ancient mythologies, carrying in them the religious reverence of centuries still have their appeal. The sight of God, the sound of music, the heavenly rhythm and the scent of jasmine have been presented by the novelist with a pliable ironical point of view.

“Elephant? Who could kill an elephant? There came to my mind the-tale of the elephant Gajendra, the elephant of mythology, who stepped into a lake and had his leg caught in the jaws of a mighty crocodile and the elephant trumpeted helplessly, struggled and in the end desperately called on Vishnu who immediately appeared and gave him the strength to come ashore out of the jaws of the crocodile.” (175)

Narayan ironically hints that Vasu, the crocodile has come there to kill the animals and destroy the peace of human beings. Still there is God to punish the evil and save the virtue. Consequently Vasu, the rakshasa invites his own death.

Even the title of the novel is at once ironic and misleading. It doesn't imply a tiger though Vasu, the main character possesses all the characteristics of a typical rakshasa of ancient Hindu mythology. A man-eater, we know, stays in forests, far from the human dwellings, attacks human beings invariably and feeds himself on their flesh. In the same way Vasu also spends most of his time in the Mempri forest always hunting and shooting. When he comes to Malgudi he himself says, “I have to be where wild animals live.”(18) Though he does not go so far as to eat human flesh, he does torture people physically and mentally so much so that everybody is scared of him. Anyone who comes in his contact directly or indirectly remains at the receiving end and suffers for no fault of one's own. And this is what delights Vasu. A sadist as he is, he derives malicious pleasure from seeing others in trouble. We are told in the novel how once he takes Nataraj to the forest and leaves him there at God's mercy. The poor Nataraj has to undergo a very sad experience there. Ironically it suggests that he is going to be a headache to innocent Nataraj.

However, the classic example of comic irony is provided by the exposure of the greedy ways of Indian astrologers. The temple procession is to be taken out and there comes the need to consult the most auspicious date. The account of the procession of consultation is most ironical in a comic way.

“On the full moon, the moon is in the sixth house, which is the best place we can have for the moon and the presiding star that day is...which means...I've left my glasses at home.”(115)

Then Sastri offers his pair of glasses to him and they try to get the best possible date for the procession. It ultimately turns to be highly ironical when the evil planning of Vasu, the taxidermist is exposed to the innocent villagers. Nataraj gets busy with printing cards, banners and making other arrangements. All of a sudden Nataraj gets a surprise visit by Rangi, the notorious temple dancer who has become the mistress of Vasu. Much to his stunned disbelief and shock, she informs him in secret that Vasu has been planning to shoot Kumar, the temple elephant on the night of the festival when the procession of Gods and Goddesses is to be taken out into the streets of the town. Nataraj decides to have a word with Vasu to convince him to

stop doing this evil task. When Nataraj corners him about his nefarious plans Vasu replies nonchalantly and shows his determination to kill the animal. Having lost hope of rescuing the elephant, Nataraj surrenders to Vishnu, who rescued Gajendra the elephant king from the clutches of a killer crocodile. Nataraj enters Vasu's living attic and takes his gun away. But Vasu remains still. It is only on the day after the function that they come to know of Vasu's accidental death. On inquiry it comes to light that he hit himself on a vital part of his head in order to kill a worrying mosquito and met with his own end. Without the aid of any mythology or outside background, his death is justified to a large extent. Formal devices of the text are far more self-sufficient to understand the meaning and comprehend the message.

The ending of Vasu as well as of the novel is dramatically ironic. Vasu plans to kill the innocent temple elephant, Kumar, but fate has stored something different for him. Just like Bhasmasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched would be turned into ashes, Vasu kills himself with his own potent fist. Ironically his fist proved to be a double edged sword that cuts the sheath itself. And Sastri is right when he observes,

“He had to conserve all that might for his own destruction. . . every demon carries within, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self destruction and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?”(242)

Malgudi's traditional values get exploited in an ironic way when the religious minded Malgudians have to face the “demon” Vasu. His arrival at once brings in its wake all sorts of confusion and chaos. As A. N. Kaul puts it,

“ . . . Vasu, the ex-wrestler turned taxidermist, who appears on Nataraj's doorstep abruptly from nowhere and immediately proceeds to muscle his way into Nataraj's life and eventually, into the life of Malgudi, is the man who breaks the apparent stability and comfortable illusions of the life of Malgudi.”(Narayan and East 13)

Nataraj, being the representative of the traditional moral life leads a calm and unruffled course of daily activity, beginning with a four o'clock morning stroll of the reel for his ablutions. The persons he meet on his way and return from the river are the familiar Malgudi figures, prominent among them being the adjournment lawyer, whose help Nataraj seeks when Vasu complains against him.

Nataraj is the most acceptable man in Malgudi's society. His family background and his own temperament draw respect from those who come in contact with him. The general atmosphere of his press is as hospitable as Nataraj himself,

“Anyone who found his feet aching as he passed down market road was welcomed to rest in my parlour on any seat that happened to be vacant. While they

rested there, people got ideas for bill forms, visiting cards or wedding invitations which they asked me to print, but many others came whose visits did not mean a paisa to me.”(Man 3)

Nataraj accepts Vasu because he is a man who never turns out a guest. But the irony of fate plays its role and that visitor brings a devastating turning point in his life. It gives impression of that old traditional Indian society in which people are bound to think of a guest as God. Comparison of Vasu with God is highly ironical. Nataraj proves to be a traditional diffident person. He finds himself unable to ask Vasu to vacate the attic of his press, as he feels dwarfed and tongue-tied before him. Vasu takes the advantage of Nataraj’s cowardice and carries on killing and doffing animals. Even the stairs of his attic are filled with stuffed creatures. Even on the night of the procession, Nataraj boldly tries to somehow overpower Vasu but runs back at the sound of alarm. His cowardice makes him the target of suspicion and once again he finds himself in a miserable plight.

Vasu’s presence in the town affects and upsets the destiny of the Malgudians who come in contact with him directly or indirectly. He openly sets up a taxidermist business and pollutes the whole atmosphere, but this hardly concerns him. And the people are too weak to retaliate. Vasu, the wild slayer and stuffer, has his way unchecked. He snubs Nataraj’s friend, entertains prostitutes and makes the air thick with the stinking smell. In his plan to assassinate and stuff the temple elephant, Vasu reveals himself as a true rakshasa. He toys with the religious sentiments of Malgudians.

“Has it occurred to you how much more an elephant is worth dead? You don’t have to find it in the first place. I can make ten thousand out of the part of this elephant... My first business will be to take out the halts and keep them apart, while the blood is still hot; trunk, legs, and even the nails- it’s a perfect animal in that way. Every bit of it is valuable.” (Man 174)

Vasu states that the dead animal has got more worth. Ultimately, it is proved that dead Vasu turns to be more harmful to Nataraj, as after his death he keeps on spoiling Nataraj’s life.

Nataraj is afraid of Vasu from the beginning to the end. Once Vasu almost authoritatively takes away the donation slips with a promise to raise funds, a pledge never to be fulfilled. But the docile Nataraj finds it hard to raise his voice against Vasu and helplessly witnesses his evil schemes. When he comes to know about Vasu’s plan to kill and stuff Kumar, Nataraj approaches Vasu, to dissuade him from his course. But as usual he does not succeed. He feels crushed and much disturbed that when the procession starts he faints right before the crowd and cuts a sorry figure. He realises that he is physically too weak and small to prevail on the potent Vasu. With tears in his eyes he lets out a terrific cry, “Oh, Vishnu! Save our elephant, and save all the innocent men and women who are going to pull the

chariot. You must come to our rescue now.” (183) Lord Vishnu certainly saves the innocent elephant from the wrath of Vasu, the cruel crocodile. Nataraj feels that with the death of Vasu, his sufferings have also come to an end, but it proves to be entirely wrong. Here Narayan presents a remarkable specimen of historical irony. Vasu dead proves more destructive to Nataraj than Vasu alive. Everybody starts suspecting Nataraj of having murdered Vasu. He virtually becomes a social outcast. His most intimate friends including Sastri start avoiding him. He is emotionally wrecked and his plight is miserable,

“This was the greatest act of destruction that the Man-eater had performed; he had destroyed my name, my friendship and my world. The thought was too much for me. Hugging the tiger cub, I burst into tears.”(240)

It is only when Sastri returns and gives him the mysterious account of Vasu’s death that Nataraj becomes his normal self. The sanctity of the blue curtain is restored and as usual Sastri peeps from behind it to inquire something about the printing labels of K. J. Soft Drinks. There is a sharp emphasis that employs the difference between life and literature. Victor Shklovsky’s distinction between the story and plot or the chronological events of the story and the technique of narrating the story has rightly been applicable in this novel from the beginning to the end.

Conclusion:

There is a general feeling about Narayan that nowhere in his novels does he preach or pontificate. He is sort of a moral analyst, who simply analyses a situation and leaves for his readers to draw their own morals. But *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* seems to be an exception, for here Narayan certainly tells his readers which way to follow in life. To quote M. K. Naik,

“The interplay between Vasu and Nataraj also indicates a contrast between two diametrically opposed attitudes to life, each shown to be disastrous in its own way, between the demonical, self-centred egotism of Vasu and the ineffectual self-effacing altruism of Nataraj, between the temerity of Vasu and the timidity of Nataraj.” (Dimensions 146-47)

Both Vasu and Nataraj are the extreme cases and hold a philosophy that does not work well. Vasu is a Machiavellian, believing in the theory that the ‘end justifies the means’. To him nothing succeeds like success and all moral and ethical considerations are impediments in the pursuit of one’s over-ambitious and impious aims at the cost of the rest of humanity. Nataraj, on the other hand, is subdued by his culture of compassion and his philosophy of tolerance, which makes him a flop in a business. He goes far in his altruism and volunteers himself to oblige others though the result is considerable inconveniences to him. He is a

thoroughly ineffectual angel of mercy. Ironically speaking the poetic justice has no room in this materialistic world.

Between the two polarities of militant egotism and self-effacing humanity represented by Vasu and Nataraj respectively, the golden path is suggested by Sastri. The very word Sastri means 'a learned man' which the level-headed and mature Sastri in reality is. He holds a practical view of things. The novelist's ironic style is the source of humour in the description of Sastri as an all-rounder, as the person who manages single-handedly all the different functions of the processes of the printings, but who is 'very tyrant' during an emergency, i.e., when any particular work is to be done on time. Then the relation of employer and employee is reversed and the employee, Sastri, becomes the top-dog. Such reversal is contrary to our expectations and so an important source of comic irony. It is he who repeatedly emphasises the inevitable self-destruction of evil. He avoids meeting with the fiend Vasu. When Vasu is dead and everybody is being cross-examined so as to find out the cause of Vasu's death, Sastri undertakes a pilgrimage and returns only when the mystery is solved. M. K. Naik rightly puts,

“With his solid common sense and staunch faith that evil, however triumphant, will ultimately destroy itself, Sastri appears to emphasise a way of life, straying away from which has brought death to Vasu and a great deal of mental anguish to Nataraj.”(149)

Narayan wants his readers to learn from Sastri to avoid extremes and to adopt a signifying path in life. With the help of ironical situations he throws light upon the various aspects of the novel. Here irony is used as an aid to get warmer with the notions of the novelist.

It is generally believed that unlike Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan does not alter or modernise the legends, but stresses their timeless relevance as stories in a highly ironical way. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* it can safely be shown that there is not a one-to-one link between the Bhasmasura myth and the novel, though the connection has been suggested very tactfully. Although it's a gigantic example of tragic irony that Vasu who was waiting for the death of an elephant, accidentally kills himself, but the death of Vasu sounds unconvincing to a modern reader. However strong a man may be, he can't fist himself to death. But as the legend goes, Bhasmasura was reduced to ashes when he put his hand over his head. Narayan too invented a similar death for Vasu, though it's not directly related to the legend. Viewed thus, “There is a persisting inter-weaving of serious parallelism and a kind of ironic contrast.”(Naik 146)

On the other hand we can vividly see that Nataraj is a feeble substitute of Lord Shiva. The legend goes that Bhasmasura came into being out of the sweat of Lord Shiva while dancing. True, the advent of Vasu in Malgudi is sudden but Nataraj has hardly any role in

that. Generally five activities such as creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment and release are associated with Lord Shiva and Nataraj is a perfect contrast to Lord Shiva as he is a weak, timid and harmless creature. Bhasmasura was destroyed by Lord Vishnu who incarnated as Mohini and artfully tricked him into suicidal action. Rangi in the novel is not so much a cause of Vasu's destruction hence the comparison between Rangi and Mohini is awfully ironic. Mohini is a divine damsel whereas Rangi, a poor temple dancer and Mohini is a perfection of feminine charms but Rangi is only a 'perfect female animal'.

In the end we have profound reasons to say that 'irony' remains a weighty weapon in the novel, which the novelist uses to hit the vice and lift the virtue. It has been utilised in such a fantabulous way that it provides a mingled feeling of tragedy and comedy. If the dialogues of Nataraj and Sastri are enveloped in a glittering wrapper of comic irony, Vasu, on the other hand exposes the elements of tragic irony. The welter and vitality of the scenes, the absurdities, pretensions and the excitements of traditional routine along with the choice of diction are all brought out with the precise touch of irony.

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